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# TOWARDS A FAITHFUL DESCRIPTION OF THE FIRST-PERSON PERSPECTIVE PHENOMENON: EMBODIMENT IN A BODY THAT HAPPENS TO BE MINE

*abstract*

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*This article aims at providing a faithful description of the first-person perspective phenomenon. After clarifying what makes a description faithful, it will argue that Perry's and Baker's theories alone do not offer such description. Nevertheless, they offer some interesting insights which, along with the phenomenological attitude, contribute to the formulation of a faithful description. This is why this article focuses on these two specific authors from a phenomenological perspective.*

*keywords*

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*Phenomenological attitude, bodily self, first-person experience, Leib, Körper*

1.  
First and  
Third-Person  
Perspective  
Experiences

Following E. Mach's example (Baker 2013, p. 38), let us imagine getting on a bus and seeing a shabby-looking man at the far end. We will probably think something along the lines of "That is an unkempt person!"; however, when we suddenly realize that the person we are looking at is our own image reflected in the bus mirror, then we will think something along the lines of 'I am the unkempt person!'.

The core argument of Baker's *Naturalism and the First-Person Perspective* is that "versions of naturalism, without first-person properties, are in error" (Baker 2013, p. XXII). Mach's example enables us to dive right into the first-person perspective phenomenon. The crucial question that this article will attempt to answer is how one can describe the experience *exemplified* by Mach's case in a *faithful* way. Therefore, how the first-person perspective can be described in a faithful way.

J. Perry provides a similar example: "I once followed a trial of sugar on a supermarket floor [...] seeking the shopper with the torn sack to tell him he was making a mess [...]. Finally it dawned on me. I was the shopper I was trying to catch" (Perry 1993, p. 167). In order to describe this baffling feeling, one can distinguish two propositions formulated by the careless shopper at two different times: 1) 'Who is making a mess?'; 2) 'I am making a mess!'.

This article will argue that Perry's theses enable one to formulate only a *partially* faithful description of the first-person perspective phenomenon<sup>1</sup>. Perry's approach, in order to be *entirely* faithful, needs to be completed: and here is where Baker and the phenomenological attitude come to the rescue.

2.  
Epistemological  
and Pragmatic  
Priority of the  
First-Person  
Perspective

Let us consider the conceptual categories through which Perry tries to describe the careless shopper's experience (Perry 1993, 2007<sup>2</sup>), which is very similar to that of Mach's example. Perry argues that the information obtained by the subject through the first-person proposition ('I am making a mess!') cannot be rephrased into a third-person perspective ('J. Perry is making a mess') without missing an *essential* information<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, the two propositions reflect a distinction between two different ways of picking up information about people. Firstly, a 'self-informative way', that is, the ordinary first-person way ('I am

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1 This phenomenon is phenomenologically conceived as the *subjective* and *personal* side of every intentional structure.

2 See also Borges 1964.

3 Cf. also Sartre 1943, Part III, Chapter I (especially § 4).

making a mess’); secondly, a ‘role-based way’, that is, a third-person reformulation (‘J. Perry is making a mess’). Only after the realization that one is the careless shopper (or, in the other example, the unkempt person), the information gained in the first-person perspective is *linked* to the information gained in third-person perspective and the two shoppers’ beliefs are no longer ‘detached’. This ‘linkage’ causes the change in beliefs. Similarly, this change determines Perry to stop following the trail and rearrange the torn sack. Perry, in order to explain this change in behaviour, devises the distinction between *belief* and *belief state*. According to him, in fact, indexical beliefs are paramount in explaining behavior and making predictions. This distinction concerns the difference between the way one believes a belief, first or third-personally, and the belief’s content. It is the belief state that explains behavior and that needs to be inherently indexical. This entails that explanations of the careless shopper’s case or of the unkempt person’s case cannot be given in terms of *what* is believed, but have to include *how* the belief is believed.

Perry’s argument leads us to claim that – according to Perry – the impossibility of translating a first-person perspective assertion into a third-person perspective, is epistemological and pragmatic. This means that the first-person perspective has only an epistemological significance, as far as it is the cognitive perspective that persons can adopt on themselves, and a pragmatic one, as far as it is the action perspective. Can Perry’s description be conceived as faithful in respect to the first-person perspective phenomenon? Before answering this question, it is necessary to identify which criteria a description should meet in order to be conceived as faithful.

### 3. The Phenomenological Attitude Provides the Criteria of Faithfulness

The phenomenological attitude towards a given phenomenon ensures the faithfulness of the phenomenon’s description: it is an attitude consistent with the phenomenological *epoché*. This means that, when approaching a given phenomenon, it is necessary to bracket what one knows about the concerned thing, apart from what appears of it within his/her *experience* and *seeing*. As M. Scheler has clearly stated, phenomenology is neither the name of a new science nor a new method. Phenomenology is “an attitude of spiritual seeing in which one can see [*er-schau*en] or experience [*er-leben*] something which otherwise remains hidden” (Scheler 1973, p. 137) and what “is seen and experienced is *given* only in the *seeing and experiencing act itself*” (Scheler 1973, p. 138). This entails that:

A philosophy based on phenomenology must be characterized first of all by the most intensely vital and most immediate contact with the world itself, that is, with those things in the world with which it is concerned, and with these things as they are immediately given in experience, that

is, in the act of experience and are ‘in themselves there’ only in this act (Scheler 1973, p. 138).

Therefore – I argue – it is possible to regard the description of a given phenomenon as faithful if and only if<sup>4</sup>:

- a. *It is consistent with the immediate experience that one has of this phenomenon.*
- b. *It is consistent with the phenomenon’s appearance and transcendence: every kind of thing has a specific way to appear and to transcend its appearance. For example, people have a specific way to appear – that is, physiognomy – and to transcend their appearance – that is, the knowledge of a person. The transcendence of the phenomenon is not its reality, but its entirety.*
- c. *It is consistent with the essential traits emerged from a phenomenological seeing. Seeing is, on the one hand, a phenomenological seeing, that is, an approach to the phenomenon that ‘puts into brackets’ all the previous information one has about it, without deriving from an immediate contact with it. On the other hand, seeing is looking for those essential traits which make this phenomenon exactly what it is.*

**4. Perry’s Account Does Not Meet All the Criteria of Faithfulness**

Now, in the light of these criteria of faithfulness, does Perry’s analysis about the first-person perspective satisfy them<sup>5</sup>? It is possible to evaluate the faithfulness of Perry’s account only by putting into brackets Perry’s position, *i.e.* a third-person naturalistic ontology. This allows us to individuate the consistency of Perry’s analysis with the first criterion. In fact, the experience of being the careless shopper is well explained by Perry’s description: one who had this experience would in fact consider Perry’s explanation faithful to his/her own experience. Nevertheless, the second criterion is not satisfied. The *appearance* of the first-person perspective phenomenon, in fact, also includes a physical component, the body, that is the physical and personal bearer of the first-person perspective. This physical component is an *essential* trait of the first-person perspective, but none of Perry’s conceptual categories enables us to identify the fundamental role played by the personal body – nor does

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4 A phenomenological background is indispensable to grasp the real meaning of these criteria (Husserl 1913, Scheler 1916 and, more particularly, Conni & De Monticelli 2008, De Monticelli 2000), that otherwise could be misunderstood; for the same reason, the knowledge of Baker’s theses is necessary to understand the following paragraphs (see, especially, Baker 2000, 2007, 2013).

5 The notion of faithfulness is comparative. If a description does not meet all the criteria of faithfulness, then it is unfaithful: however, it can be *more or less* faithful in comparison with other descriptions of the same phenomenon.

Perry recognize other essential features of the first-person perspective phenomenon. This implies that Perry's analysis does not meet the third criterion and therefore we can conclude that his description is unfaithful.

5. **Ontological  
Priority of the  
First-Person  
Perspective:  
Can Baker's  
Account Be  
Conceived as  
Faithful?**

The essential features that Perry fails to recognize seem to be acknowledged by Baker, especially the ontological priority of the first-person perspective, the distinction between the two stages of the first-person perspective and, therefore, the notion of 'self-concept' (Baker 2013). For this reason, the conceptual categories through which Baker argues her theses contribute, in a valuable way, to the formulation of a faithful description of this phenomenon. At close analysis, Baker's approach towards the first-person perspective phenomenon seems to consider the priority of the first-person perspective as *ontological* as well as epistemological and pragmatic. This ontological priority prevents first-person perspective sentences from being translated into third-person perspective. Ontology is conceived by Baker as the 'inventory' of all that exists: it "includes every object and property needed for a complete description of reality" (Baker 2013, p. 169). Baker conceives the first-person perspective as an ineliminable and irreducible property necessarily belonging to ontology: although ontological naturalism tries to rid reality of the appearance of first-personal phenomena by naturalizing them, the first-person perspective cannot be naturalized (Baker 2013, pp. 28, 30).

As I mentioned earlier, the distinction between the two stages of the first-person perspective and, therefore, the notion of 'self-concept' are *essential* traits of the first-person perspective phenomenon. In order to understand the necessity of these two features to achieve a faithful description, let us consider how Baker analyzes the experience of the unkempt person that we saw earlier.

He did not realize that he\* was the unkempt person referred to: He was referring to himself without realizing that it was himself\* he was referring to. Soon, Mach realized that it was himself whom he was looking at [...]. And because Mach had a robust first-person perspective, with that realization came a raft of others [...]. In general, once a person has a robust first-person perspective, then his simple assertions using 'I' are connected to 'I\*' sentences (Baker 2013, pp. 38-39).

This description seems to be *more* faithful than Perry's. Perry, in fact, identifies only *some* essential traits of the first-person perspective phenomenon, such as the epistemological and pragmatic priority of the

first-person perspective, the distinction between different ways of picking up information about people, the idea of linkage and the dichotomy between belief and belief state. However, these features are not enough to make the description of this phenomenon faithful. These features are essential, but they are not the *only* ones.

6.  
Baker's  
Criticisms  
Against Perry's  
Theses

Baker investigates Perry's position in chapter 3 of *Naturalism and the First-Person Perspective*. Baker's description of the careless shopper's case seems to be *more* faithful than the one offered by Perry. This is because Baker makes use of her own conceptual categories concerning the distinction between the two stages of the first-person perspective and the 'self-concept'<sup>6</sup>. I will now briefly consider the two main criticisms that Baker addresses to Perry's analysis.

(1) Perry does not give a non-first-person account of how the two notions of himself [...] became linked, and (2) Perry attempts to construe first-person phenomena in terms of ways of knowing associated with identity; but ways of knowing associated with identity are insufficient for first-person phenomena without a capacity to conceive of oneself as oneself\* in the first person. So, there is no real reduction of the first person (Baker 2013, p. 52).

While the second criticism is very solid, the first one, at close analysis, seems to miss the mark. Perry does not give a non first-person account of what linkage is and how it happens; this means that his account ends up being inadequate to his reductive needs. More importantly, his account turns out to be *partially* consistent with a faithful description of the first-person perspective phenomenon, because it identifies some essential traits of this phenomenon. In fact, if Perry's naturalism – along with a phenomenological attitude – is put into brackets and if Perry's argument about the pragmatic and epistemological priority of the first-person perspective is acknowledged as faithful, then it becomes evident that one cannot demand from Perry to provide an account of the *linkage* in a third-person perspective.

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6 The experience of being the unkempt person and that of being the careless shopper are well explained by Baker's description: one who had these experiences would in fact consider Baker's explanation faithful to his/her own experience. This entails that Baker's approach meets the first criterion.

7.  
Baker's Account  
Is Not Consistent  
with All the  
Criteria of  
Faithfulness: the  
Phenomenological  
Distinction  
Between *Leib* and  
*Körper*

Perry's account is not consistent with all those criteria of faithfulness discussed above, and the same applies to Baker's account. Her description, in fact, does not satisfy the second and the third criterion, because it does not embrace an *essential* trait of the first-person perspective phenomenon, that is, the *phenomenological* distinction between *Leib* and *Körper* (Husserl 1952, § 35-41)<sup>7</sup>. For this reason, her description is not consistent with the phenomenon's appearance and transcendence and with the essential features emerging from a phenomenological seeing.

Baker rightly argues that the first-person perspective needs to be embodied (Baker 2013). Yet, the way in which Baker conceives this embodiment seems questionable. As I said earlier, Perry does not recognize the significance of the physical component, whereas, according to Baker, the bearers of the robust first-person perspective are embodied human persons. A human person is in fact necessarily *constituted* by a body. According to Baker, the subject of experiences is the whole person, which is *constituted* by a whole body and which is not reducible to his/her brain, mind or body (Baker 2013, p. 142). This aspect turns out to be fundamental for a faithful description of first-person bodily experiences.

The crucial point is the thesis according to which "although we are essentially embodied, we do not essentially have the bodies that we now have" (Baker 2013, p. 142). This entails that the person has essentially *a* body, not the body belonging to him/her. Granted that the body has to provide the mechanisms supporting robust first-person perspective, this body can be made of anything. Going down this road, one might therefore end up to be constituted by non-organic bodies. In fact, Baker says:

What is required for our continued existence is the continued exemplification of our first-person perspectives, along with some kind of body that has mechanisms capable of doing what our brains do (Baker, 2013: p. 142).

This implies that we are *fundamentally* persons, who *necessarily* are embodied and who have the body that we have only in a *contingent* way. In short, according to Baker's theory:

We are constituted by our bodies, and the bodies that constitute us now are organisms. With enough neural implants and prosthetic limbs [...] we may come to be constituted by bodies that are partially or wholly

7 This distinction is broadly articulated, for example, by M. Merleau-Ponty, D. Legrand, A. Mandrigin, J. Kiverstein, A. Noë, M. Matthen and T. Metzinger.

nonorganic [...]. The property of being me is the property of being *this* exemplifier of a first-person perspective. It is being this exemplifier of a first-person perspective that makes me *me* (Baker 2013, pp. 149, 155).

Basically, Baker's thesis seems to lack a definition of the *constraints* of the body's variability, which are aimed at preserving the personal identity. Baker's approach seems to lack a phenomenological distinction between *Leib* and *Körper*.

8.  
The First-  
Person  
Perspective Is  
Embodied in  
That Body That  
Is Mine

The absence of this phenomenological distinction makes Baker's description of the first-person perspective an *unfaithful* account of this phenomenon. This aporia in Baker's theory can be clearly understood if one considers the *embodied* experience deriving from playing a particular kind of game that will now be illustrated and which bears some similarities with Mach's and Perry's examples.

Let us imagine playing this game: sitting around a circular table, we lay our hands on it and then move our right hand to the right of our playmate's left hand so that one's left hand is located to the left of our playmate's right hand. Now, in turn, everybody has to lift up their hands so that all the hands are lifted up in succession one after the other. Playing this game is rather puzzling, because one is easily tricked into forgetting to lift his/her hand up at his/her turn and, instead, wait for the playmate sitting next to him/her to lift his/her hand up: it is as if one feels that one's *own* hand is not his/her, but his/her playmate's. It is possible to describe this baffling feeling derived from playing this game by distinguishing two propositions, formulated by the forgetful playmate at two different times: 1) 'Why is the other playmate not lifting his/her hand up?'; 2) 'Ah, it is my turn, I am not lifting my hand up!'. The analogy with Perry's careless shopper is evident and here drawn on purpose: 1) 'Who is making a mess?'; 2) 'I am making a mess!'.  
The experience of being the forgetful playmate cannot be described in a faithful way neither through Perry's conceptual categories nor through Baker's. Surely, some conceptual categories conceived by Perry are useful to *partially* describe the forgetful playmate's experience, but none of them enables us to find out about the fundamental role of the personal body. Similarly, Baker's proposal also fails to shed light on the baffling feeling associated with the game case. Her approach allows us to grasp only some essential traits of the first-person perspective and does not allow one to understand how the forgetful playmate's experience is *firstly* an embodied experience, which *inherently* concerns the phenomenological distinction between *Leib* and *Körper*. The difficulty in explaining this feeling makes the



peculiarity of this game case clear, especially when compared with Perry's case of the careless shopper: the latter can be clearly illustrated by Baker's theory, demonstrating how the impossibility of translating an experience lived in first-person perspective ('Ah, I am the messy shopper!') into a third-person perspective ('J. Perry is the messy shopper') is ontological, epistemological and pragmatic. However Baker's conceptual categories do not allow one to fully understand what happens in the game case, *i.e.* why the players do not immediately lift their hands up at their turn. In the game case it seems impossible to understand the reason of that puzzling feeling unless we are minded to recognize that it is not sufficient that the first-person perspective is embodied in a body. It is necessary that the first-person perspective is embodied in the body that is *mine*: not a body that happens to be mine and could be someone else's, but a body that is mine. The first-person perspective is embodied in *my* body, in that personal body that is the bearer of the personal perspective on the 'world-of-life'. To ignore this aspect means to abolish the distinction between *Leib* and *Körper*, that is, the distinction that enables us to understand how the assertion 'Ah, it is my turn, I am not lifting up my hand!' would lose its meaning if we did not establish the constraints of the body's variability<sup>8</sup>.

### 9. Body's Appearance and Transcendence

In Baker's view the person is just embodied in a body whose main task is supporting the first-person perspective. This implies that the *physiognomy* of the personal body is completely disregarded: the person is not essentially characterized by his/her body. However, the physiognomy of the body is what strikes us first when looking at someone. Baker's account, despite being better than Perry's description, is unfaithful to the essential traits emerging from a phenomenological *seeing* of the phenomenon's appearance itself. A specific phenomenological attitude therefore, along with the distinction between *Leib* and *Körper*, enables one to discover that faithful description that this article sets out to find. Nevertheless, the phenomenon's transcendence itself suggests that the individuation of the first-person perspective's essential features cannot be limited to this research; as a matter of fact, it demands a continuous exercise of phenomenological seeing. The faithfulness of this description can only be gradually achieved: phenomenology's primary task is a continuous attempt to comprehend the essential traits of every phenomenon.

To ignore the distinction between *Leib* and *Körper* means to ignore the

<sup>8</sup> The game case is partly similar to the phenomenon of the rubber-hand illusion: a further investigation focused on the scientific counterpart of the argument here presented could support these claims with empirical evidence.

distinction between body's appearance and transcendence. The body as a physical object represents the transcendence of the body's immediate appearance, *i.e.* the experienced body. This priority of the experienced body is clearly explained by Husserl: "*der Leib zugleich als Leib und als materielles Ding auftritt*" (Husserl 1991, p. 158), that is to say, the experienced body appears *immediately* as an experienced body and as a physical thing. It is the experienced body that can be conceived as *Leib* or *Körper*. *Leib* and *Körper* are two sides of the same coin: the first-person perspective is necessarily embodied in a *Leib*, which, necessarily, is a *Körper*. Without the notions of *Leib* and *Körper*, it seems impossible to formulate a faithful description of what happens to the forgetful playmate. Quite differently from what happens in the example of the careless shopper's and that of the unkempt person, the game case involves the personal body in a more specific way. A description of the first-person perspective that aspires to be faithful to the phenomenon itself has to examine this first-person bodily experience.

- 10. No First-Person Perspective Without Bodily Self** To conclude, a faithful description of the first-person perspective phenomenon has now been given, thanks to the dialectic examination of the phenomenological attitude and of Perry's and Baker's theses. It has been argued that there is no first-person perspective without *my* body and there is no bodily self without the first-person perspective: the body in which the first-person perspective is embodied is *my* body. As long as one acknowledges this main feature, it is possible to formulate a thoroughly faithful description of a given experience, such as in the case of the careless shopper, of the unkempt person and of the forgetful playmate.

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